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This is to certify that the attached translation no. 22188 is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, a true and accurate rendition from German into English of a Application No. 298-148 for New U.S. Application for: DATENKONFIGURATOR

inlingua TRANSLATION SERVICE

Susan Casbar

Susan Casbar, Executive Director

Subscribed and sworn to before me
this 28th day of December, 2001.

EILEEN B. HENNESSY
Notary Public, State of New York
No. 01HEN1759563
Qualified in New York County
Commission expires March 30, 2003

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SAE schaarschmidt analytic engineering GmbH
D-84187 Weng

**Process and Device for Managing Automatic Data Flow
Between Data Processing Units for Operational Order Processing**

This invention relates to a process and a device for managing automatic data flow between data processing units for order processing, particularly for a variant product, that comprises at least one ERP system for resource planning for order processing, and one order preparation unit for preparation of the current order.

Various software and data processing units generally participate in the handling of customer orders from placement of the order to billing. For example, first the product to be manufactured is established by means of an input terminal, i.e., the individual parameters of the product ordered are established. Then, based on previously-determined product specifications, the product is designed on a CAD system and a design drawing is produced. Production planning is then undertaken on an ERP system (an "Enterprise Resource Planning System") to carry out company-wide resource planning with regard to production, finance, distribution and plant organization. The production is generally handled by an electronic production order planning system that selects, controls and supplies materials to the production equipment required. Furthermore, machine programs for controlling the production equipment or facilities must be fed the

corresponding parameters for controlling the equipment. Delivery and accounting, including bookkeeping, etc., has recently been turned over to the corresponding software modules. The problem here is that the software structure of a company is generally a colorful palette made up of a variety of software products. The individual software modules or data processing units are generally not compatible with each other so that networking is generally impossible. The data used in one system are unusable to the next system. Moreover, an ERP system, for example, requires different input data than a CAD system can supply so that automatic interaction among the modules is not possible even to that extent.

This invention relates to facilitating automatic data flow between data processing units involved in order processing for a specific product.

This task is solved, according to the invention, by a process and a device according to Claims 1 and 4. Preferred embodiments of the invention are the subjects of Subclaims.

A central control unit is also provided that can be connected with any of the data processing units, including the ERP system and the order preparation equipment, where a set of product variables with specific product parameters is held by the central control unit, in a memory, for the variants; this memory is queried so that one set of specific product parameters is produced in the central control unit. From this set of specific product parameters, the central control unit generates a set of ERP parameters that the ERP system requires to prepare the specific order. ERP parameters generated in this manner are automatically forwarded by the central control unit to the ERP system so that the corresponding data is available there for the preparation of the special order. Depending on which

In particular, from the set of specific product parameters retrieved via the order preparation unit, the central control unit can also generate a set of design-relevant CAD parameters required by the CAD system to prepare the specific order. The central control unit makes them automatically available to the CAD system so that it can be in a position to prepare a design drawing for the individually-configured product. In view of the large quantity of data already in CAD systems, it proves more than very advantageous to call up only the specific product parameters and to generate the CAD parameters automatically from them, based on the CAD system prepares the drawing, particularly based on a prepared parameterized design model.

The data retrievals of the individual data processing units, i.e., the data sets required by the data processing units as well as the ERP system and the CAD system, are compiled in the central control unit into a central set of variables and returned by a query from the order preparation unit. The set of variables receiving values in such manner can then be almost reverse engineered, i.e., divided into ERP data and CAD data, etc., by the ERP system and the CAD system.

The combination of data retrievals from the individual data processing units in the central control unit requires only a one-time input of the order or the product-

specific parameters. All data processing units involved in the order processing are supplied from there with the appropriate data. The central control unit then creates a virtual or cybernetic interface between the ERP system and the CAD system. The ERP and CAD data generated by the central control unit, that are forwarded automatically to the ERP system or the CAD system, are expediently generated in precisely the data format preset by the appropriate interface to the ERP system or the CAD system and are thus compatible with the system in question.

In another aspect of the invention, a reduction in variables is provided for. The set of variables held ready by the central control unit is determined based on the ERP parameters required by the ERP system and based on the CAD parameters required by the CAD system, where corresponding or dependent ERP parameters and CAD parameters are combined into a single common variable. If, for example, the ERP system requires the length of the variant product such as a ladder in order to generate a request to the plant organization, and if the CAD system also needs said product length, only one variable, "Product Length", is held ready in the central control unit and assigned a corresponding value during product configuration. Said common variable, "Product Length", is then re-divided into two parameters, i.e., on the one hand, into the "Product Length" ERP parameter compatible with the ERP system, and on the other, into the "Product Length" CAD parameter compatible with the CAD system. An example of the dependency of two ERP and CAD parameters is that, with a given product length, there is only one permissible color. If, for example, all ladders of more than 10 meters in length are red in color, only the product length has to be held ready as a variable in the central control module. As a function of the value contained in this variable, the central control unit then generates the dependent ERP parameter, "Color".

Preferably, the corresponding variant logic that determined said dependency of product features is placed in a logic module in the central control unit so that it can be accessed there during generation of the data specific to the appropriate data processing unit.

In another aspect of the invention, the central control unit not only controls the data flow between the ERP system and the CAD system, but also other data processing units, such as a production control center, can also be included in particular. The central control unit preferably generates a set of production parameters from the data retrieved by the order production unit out of the data held ready by the ERP system and/or the data held ready by the CAD system and automatically forwards it to the production control center. Here, a set of variables to be assigned the data prepared by the order preparation unit, the ERP system or the CAD system can advantageously be held ready. This advantageously ensures that the production parameters are generated in a format compatible with the production control center.

In another aspect of the invention, order simulation means can be provided that generate an order simulation query to the ERP system based on the set of production parameters determined in the central control unit. As a function of the parameters forwarded by the retrieval, the ERP system generates supply data such as delivery date, price, etc., and forwards this supply data to the central control unit. The latter forwards said supply data to the order preparation unit, preferably online, so that said supply data can be communicated to the customer immediately upon order configuration.

The order preparation unit advantageously has display means for visualizing variant products. A parameterized model of the current variant product can advantageously be stored in a storage unit; the model is assigned the data on the variant product retrieved by the order preparation unit and then displayed based on the custom-tailored configured product.

The invention is explained below in greater detail based on a preferred embodiment and one related drawing. The single drawing shows, schematically, the construction of a device according to the invention as well as its cooperation with various data processing units included in the order handling related to a variant product.

The central control unit 1 can be created in the form of a software tool that runs on a computer. As the Figure shows, data transfer connections 2 are provided between the central control unit 1 and various data processing units involved in order handling. In particular, the central control unit 1 can be connected with a CAD system 3, an ERP system, i.e., an "Enterprise Resource Planning System", 4, a production control center 5 that, in turn, contains or can be connected with various production machines, as well as with the data processing unit of a contractor 6, a subcontractor or supplier 7, if applicable, and a customer 8.

Furthermore, an order preparation unit 9 is provided that can be in the form of a portable computer, such as a laptop with display, as well as the display software running thereon.

The central control unit 1 controls the data flow between data processing units 3 through 9, as explained below. In relation to the example of a ladder, the following flow of functions results:

In the CAD system 3, a parameterized model of the individually configurable ladder is held ready. The dimensions are replaced in such a parameterized model with variables and the individual variables can be linked via calculation rules. For instance, the length of the ladder, the number of rungs, and the distance between rungs can be variable and thus parameterized.

In the ERP system 4, a variant logic for the ladder is constructed, i.e., various features such as color, length and feature characteristics, such as the color red, or the 1 meter length, can be defined and placed in relation to each other. For example, provision can be made such that if the length is more than 1 meter, the color is always red.

The data requests and the interrelations between the ERP system 4 and the CAD system 3 are automatically picked up in the central control unit 1.

Generally, the data sets that the data processing units 3 through 7 require to be able to process a special order are compiled in the central control unit 1 into a common, product-specific set of variables. These variables are assigned specific values centrally in the central control unit 1 upon configuration of the variant product. The common variable set is then divided again into data sets specific to data processing units and fed to the appropriate data processing unit.

This can occur in the following manner:

By means of order preparation unit 9, the product variables (in the case of the ladder, the length of the ladder, the number of rungs, the distance between rungs, the material of the ladder and the color of the ladder) are retrieved. The

set of variables for the ladder product, held ready in the central control unit, is then assigned the retrieved values so that a customer-specific set of product parameters is produced. Both the set of variables and the corresponding specific product parameters set are stored in a storage unit 10 of the central control unit 1. From the customer-specific configured product parameters, the central control unit 1 generates first the CAD parameters and the ERP parameters that it transmits to the CAD system 3 and the ERP system 4. The CAD and ERP parameters here are formatted specifically to the system, so that the data are made available in forms compatible with the CAD system or the ERP system. Upon generating the CAD and ERP parameters, the central control unit 9 accesses the data linkage means 11 that links the individual variables from the stored set of variables with various CAD and ERP parameters. The data linkage means 11 has a logic module 12 for this that stores the dependencies between ERP and CAD parameters and determines the appropriate ERP and CAD parameters from the corresponding variables or customer-specific configured product parameters, using the stored dependencies. In the CAD system 3 and in the ERP system 4, CAD and ERP parameters generated in such manner are determined accordingly.

In the ERP System, a customer order can be produced and booked, while in the CAD System, a scale CAD drawing can be produced through the data supplied by the central control unit 1, based on the parameterized model of the ladder. This drawing can either be assigned directly to the customer order in the ERP system, via a document management system, and thus forwarded to other sections of the company, or it can be newly produced whenever needed through the parameterized model construction and the data stored in the central control unit. Here it is a particular advantage that only the parameters specifying the product, and not the whole drawing, have to be stored. The otherwise very large

amounts of data usually required for CAD drawings are thus avoided and substantially less disk space is used.

Furthermore, the central control unit 1 controls the data flow from and to the production machinery. From the data retrieved by the order preparation unit 9, the data prepared by the ERP system and particularly from the data prepared by the CAD system, the central control unit generates a set of production parameters that are required by the production control center 5 or a production data server with related memory to carry out the production of the product in question, and this, in the format suitable for the production control center, and then sends this data to the production control center 5. Similarly to the principle described above, a set of variables can be held ready for the production parameters in the central control unit, which variables are assigned the data prepared by the order preparation unit 9, the ERP system 4 and the CAD system 3. If necessary, dependency and linkage rules can be carried out here as well; they can be stored in the logic module 12. The parameters for machine control are also generated from the data already present. To the extent a CAD system is not used, this can be only the data retrieved by the order preparation unit 9 and the ERP system 4. Usually, however, a CAD system is used.

The control of the data flow with the production department or the production control center can be controlled in various ways after further processing in the ERP system, i.e., the disposition and release of the production order. With manual production, provision can be made for the CAD design drawings prepared in the CAD system to be loaded into the appropriate workstation in the production area. On the other hand, with automatic production, provision can be made for the control program to be supplied with data from the central control unit. The data queries of the production control center are stored in the central

control unit in the manner and way described above, and are placed in relation with the data queries already present from the ERP system and the CAD system.

The central control unit 1 therefore assigns, to the set of variables it holds ready, not only the data retrieved by the order preparation unit, but also in part the data that were produced initially by the processing of the product-specific parameters generated by other data processing units, as is obvious in connection with the production control center. For example, a variable, "Production Start", can be held ready for the production control center in the central control unit 1. The value assigned to this variable can be determined in the ERP system, based on the previously processed ERP parameters that, in turn, were generated using the data input through the order preparation unit. The ERP system can determine the production start particularly as a function of the delivery date requested by the customer and the resources available in the company. The central control unit 1 therefore forms a virtual interface between the ERP system, the CAD system, production control, suppliers, etc.

In addition to the software products of one company, the software of another company can also be connected to this arrangement. For example, if there is a customized product, provision can be made to connect the CAD system of the supplier. The central control unit thus forms the interface between different companies as well.

In the case of customer-specific configuration of the product using the order preparation unit 9, the customer-specific configured product can be displayed advantageously directly at the site. The order preparation unit, as the Figure shows, has display means 15, for instance in the form of a display as well as storage means 16, in which a parameterized model of the variant product is

stored. Based on the data on the customer-specific product retrieved and input through the input terminal 17, the variables of the parameterized model are assigned and presented to the customer on the spot through the display means. Furthermore, through a customer order simulation, the delivery date and price can even be determined through an online connection to the ERP system of the supplier, preferably using an order simulation device. The relevant data for the customer order simulation can be collected by a representative or a sales employee. This data can be stored in the central control unit.

The automatic data flow control described here also excels particularly in that the parameters and logics for all related software programs can be produced by means of a selection, through configuration masks or using a display tool. These may, in particular, be supplier systems, the CAD or ERP systems of the manufacturer, the supplier or even the customer. Of course, the product that is the subject of the order processing need not be a self-contained product, particularly not as simple a product as a ladder. Orders concerning complex projects, such as the construction of an airport or a residential complex, can be processed advantageously in cases where almost the entire project represents a variant product that has to be configured. This control tool can also be used for Internet portals. Based on a one-time configuration determination, all further required systems are provided with the appropriate specific data.